

Academic Advising and Counseling in Universities in South East Nigeria: A New Perspective

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Abstract

Academic advising and counseling is the lynchpin for students' success in the university and integral to fulfilling the teaching and learning mission of higher education. This study utilized the survey design to explore aspects of academic advising services offered in the universities and their influence on some variables, identify the level of accessibility of academic advisers and institutional mechanisms as well as identify ways of fostering academic advising in the universities. Five hundred and forty (280 males, 260 females, mean age 23.5, SD 0.54) undergraduates purposively sampled from four universities in South East, Nigeria completed the Undergraduate Academic Advising and Counseling questionnaire. Result using percentage, mean and t test revealed that academic advising as done in the universities surveyed focused mainly on academic matters neglecting other important areas. It was also found that most of the academic advisers were not always accessible and institutional mechanisms were weak. Ways of fostering academic advising like slotting time in the time table for academic advising were identified. Training academic staff on academic advising issues, university showing more commitment on academic advising and getting feedback from students were some of the recommendations made. Limitations, further research and implications were highlighted.

Keywords: Academic advising, counseling, universities, South East Nigeria,

1. Introduction

Several sectors of the society have been undergoing changes in response to the forces of globalization and internationalization. The higher education system is already in the web of twenty – first century explosions. The core missions and values of higher education still remain to contribute to the sustainable development and improvement of society as a whole. The universal mandate of our universities is to produce highly qualified graduates and responsible citizens able to meet the needs of all sectors of human activity among others (World Conference on Higher Education, 1998)

The current influx into tertiary institutions poses a great challenge to the realization of that mandate. With the increase in student population, institutions are faced with increasing diversity of student population both in academic preparation, socio economic background and other factors. It can no longer be assumed that students are sufficiently motivated to learn for themselves in the face of indifferent teaching. There is, therefore, the need for tertiary institutions to reposition themselves to adequately cater for such diversity.

Academic advising and counseling have been seen as crucial to the higher education learning experience (Simpson, 2013). Through academic advising, students learn how to become actively

engaged in the higher education system by thinking critically about their roles as students at the university and as adults in the larger society (Simpson, 2013). Academic advising and counseling have been seen as integral to fulfilling the teaching and learning mission of higher education (NACADA, 2006). It is the core element in all institutions that is formally structured into the students' academic life that forms the connection between the student's individual goals and institutional mission. It is an important avenue for discussing connections between advisee goals and the mission of the University (Hemwall & Trachte, 2005). Though students are expected to be responsible for constructing their knowledge, learning is also seen to depend on institutions and staff generating conditions that stimulate and encourage their involvement (Australian Council of Educational Research, 2010).

Academic advising and counseling services offer academic advising, career and special services and support to students. Academic advising is designed to assist students in achieving academic and personal success through informed decision making and academic planning. Students are assisted to take full advantage of their experience at the university to maximize their potential and realize their personal as well as institutional goals. Oriano (2013) sees academic advising and counseling as critical lynchpin for student success. According to Oriano (2013) academic advising in its most comprehensive and effective form can no longer be characterized as merely assisting students to register for courses. Academic counseling is a service concerned with creating opportunities and awareness for personal/social, educational and vocational growth of the individual that can enhance national and international development (Nwokolo, Anyamene, Oraegbunam, Anyachebelu, Okoye, & Obineli, 2010). Universities must begin to find ways to holistically engage students from first year in planning their academic and vocational futures if we are to make needed improvements in university education. Academic advising is primarily a developmental process in which, over time, students clarify their life and career goals and make educational choices that will assist them to realize their goals. During academic advising, faculty members work one-on-one with the students to relay important cultural beliefs and values about the University. Habley (1994) saw it as the only structured service in the University in which all students have the opportunity for on-going one-on-one contact with a concerned university staff outside the formal classroom.

The mission of academic advising and counseling is to facilitate students' success by offering a comprehensive range of quality services that promote educational, career and personal/social development. It plays vital roles by providing services to enhance the learning environment and address the diverse needs of all students. Faber and Avadikian (2002) see academic advising as an important academic service that has not yet been fully institutionalized in many campuses. According to them, academic advising gets each student close to faculty members who rub off their experience of the university on the students and thereby foster and propagate university culture.

Academic advising is uniquely positioned to make an enduring impact on the academic and personal success of the students by empowering, challenging and supporting them. Effective and proactive academic advising can assist students to better understand their academic disciplines and enable them to participate actively as members of the academic community. Campbell and Nutt (2008) state that academic advising when done well plays a critical role in connecting students with learning opportunities to foster and support their engagement, success and the attainment of key learning outcomes. Academic advisers are key drivers of that achievement.

The role of academic advisers is to perform specific functions designed to assist students maximize their potential in the university. Advisers can help students understand their roles at various point in life such as the role of a student or a citizen in the larger community by helping students develop autonomy, integrity and responsibility; characteristics, Chickening (1994) says are the most important skills acquired in the university in order to be successful in life. Advisers can also help students through a wide variety of situations. Effective advisers achieve their goal of advising when they are accessible and do more than provide information (Hunter, McCalla-Wriggins & White, 2007).

Academic advisers must first change their mindset about academic advising and its purposes. Since academic advising extends learning opportunities beyond the traditional classroom (Chemers, Hu & Garcia, 2001), then advisers must create environments that encourage learning by demonstrating respect and fostering positive and trusting interpersonal relationship with their students. They should possess adequate knowledge of institutional vision and mission statements (Donnelly, 2009).

Simpson (2013) notes that effective advisers must assess each particular student in terms of his needs, goals, interests, skills, and abilities and adapt their approach to address them appropriately. To streamline the activities of academic advisers, Hemwall and Trachte (2005) proposed ten vital principles academic advisers should adhere to. They include consideration of university mission and vision; encouragement of critical thinking in students; alignment of advisee personal goals with institutional goals; awareness of advisee's strengths and weaknesses, dissecting advisee mindset and sensitizing them as well as understanding advisees' individual backgrounds. Others are creating conducive atmosphere for academic excellence; leading the dialogue between adviser and advisee as an advanced learner with more useful information; guiding advisees in ways that make the students think critically about their role in college as well as to face contradictions and difficult issues as they arise. Lowenstein (2005) also outlined basic functions of academic advisers cutting across their academic, personal/social and career aspects as well as full integration into the university culture.

Emphasis on academic advising stems from its obvious importance in actualizing individual and institutional goals. Quality advising fosters student development and at the same time enriches the academic community, the adviser, and the society at large. It contributes to students' perceptions of the University as they teach their students the cultural robes of their institutions. Good academic advising generally has a positive impact on students' academic performance as well as personal satisfaction with their college experience (Habley and McClanahan, 2004). Universities should leverage on academic advising to enhance learning outcomes and other benefits. Simpson (2013) identifies the benefits of effective academic advising as creating relationships between gown and town (college and real world), increasing retention, fostering alumni relationships, fostering development of life-long learning and decision-making abilities as well as adjustment to college life. Drake (2011) highlights that academic advising assists student to understand their strengths and weaknesses. Oriano (2013) concludes that recurrent and meaningful academic advising increases student's engagement and learning outcomes. Smith (2005) identifies proper academic advising as increasing overall satisfaction with college, promoting effective use of campus support services and encouraging contact with staff outside the classroom. Good academic advising might be the single most under-estimated factor of a successful college experience (Light, 2001).

However, Pizzolato (2008) shows that advising is more effective in eliciting learning outcomes when advisers alter their communications with advisees in ways that encourage an interpersonal relationship between adviser and advisee, stress personal connectedness, genuine concern and accommodation based on the specific needs of the advisee. Pang (2012) proposed a learner (advisee) - centered, holistic and flexible academic advising in our Universities for it to be impactful. Pietras (2010) suggests a restructuring of the provisions of academic advising in an effective and efficient manner that meets the needs of both the advisee, college and the society.

As currently structured, academic advising in most Nigerian Universities is limited in its ability to assist students in identifying academic and career pathways that will help them achieve their goals. As pointed out by Faber and Avadikian (2002) academic advising is not a priority in many universities including those in South East Nigeria. There are no institutional mechanisms put in place to ensure that students receive quality advising. Many of the advisers are not grounded in institutional policies and culture. The purpose of this study is to survey academic advising and counseling in some Universities in South East Nigeria across some disciplines. The objectives of the study are specifically to:

1. Determine aspects of academic advising offered by advisers as perceived by students.

2. Identify the perceived influence of academic advising on some variables.
3. Identify the accessibility of academic advisers to students.
4. Identify the institutional mechanisms for monitoring academic advising
5. Identify ways academic advising could be fostered in the universities.
6. Ascertain if there are gender differences in the aspects of academic advising provided to students.

Four research questions were raised to address the issues. Thus,

1. What are the aspects of academic advising offered by advisers in Nigeria universities?
2. To what extent do students perceive the influence of academic advising?
3. To what extent are academic advisers accessible to students?
4. To what extent are institutions monitoring academic advising in the universities?
5. In what ways can academic advising be fostered in Nigerian Universities?

2. Hypothesis

There is no significant gender difference on the aspects of academic advising offered to students in Nigerian Universities.

This study is significant as it has the potential to change the way academic advising is rendered in Nigeria and point to the direction of a more robust, elaborate and comprehensive advising model. The goal of academic advising is to improve the overall learning experience of the University students. This will not be achieved if academic advising is done in a haphazard manner or is merely assisting students to register courses. A sound academic advising properly articulated and implemented will assist students to carve out niches for themselves in the global marketplace where there are no "jobs" but with boundless opportunities for those prepared for them.

3. Method

Participants: participants were 540 (280 male, 260 female, age range 19 – 36, mean age 23.5) undergraduates in their 400 level who had been assigned academic adviser for at least two previous academic sessions. They were purposively sampled from four Federal Universities in South East Nigeria. The Federal University in the fifth state was new and so did not meet the selection criteria. Those sampled completed the consent form before completing the questionnaire.

Instrument: The Undergraduate Academic Advising and Counseling (UAAC) questionnaire was used for the study. The instrument was validated by three experts in Guidance and Counselling, Psychology and Measurement and Evaluation. The reliability was established using Cronbach alpha after a two – week interval which yielded coefficient of 0.88. The questionnaire was divided into sections. Section A elicited demographic variables like Institution, course and level of study, age and gender and whether they have academic advisers. Section B contained aspects of academic advising and counseling with 25 items subdivided into academic matters (1 – 10), adjustment to University life and culture, (11 – 16); Personal life (17 – 23); and Career focus (24 – 25). The respondents were expected to rate the overall influence of academic advising under those subheadings in section C. Section D dealt on the perception of the respondents on the accessibility of the academic advisers. Section E was on institutional mechanisms for monitoring of academic advising while Section F captured how academic advising could be fostered in the Nigerian Universities.

Procedure: Research assistants were trained and used to administer the questionnaire. A total of 600 questionnaires were distributed. Forty (6.67%) were incomplete, twenty (3.33%) did not meet the criteria. Five hundred and forty (90%) was thus used for the study. Section B adopted Yes or No response pattern with 1.5 as acceptable mean. Percentage was used to ascertain the overall rating of influence of academic advising on the four subdivisions and in the accessibility of the academic advisers. Section E which was on institutional mechanisms for academic advising also

adopted Yes or No pattern. Section F adopted the four-point rating scale of Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree and Strongly Disagree with 4, 3, 2 and 1 respectively. The acceptable mean was 2.50.

4. Results

Table 1. Mean ratings for aspects of academic advising and counseling

S/N	My academic adviser	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Provided guidance on how to complete my course registration	1.94	0.94	Accept
2	Guided me to make short and long-term academic goals	1.34	0.34	Reject
3	Provided information on academic rules and regulations	1.77	0.66	Accept
4	Explained university grading system and requirements for graduation	1.74	0.85	Accept
5	Guided me on appropriate time management	1.50	0.38	Accept
6	Provided information on deadline for registration and other issues	1.37	0.08	Reject
7	Provided guidance on appropriate study behavior	1.27	0.007	Reject
8	Provided guidance on how to monitor and assess progress	1.31	0.04	Reject
9	Provided information on change of degree programmes or transfers	1.69	0.76	Accept
10	Has adequate knowledge of my academic records	1.76	0.91	Accept
11	Explained how best to maximize my potential in the university	1.29	0.49	Reject
12	Assisted me to diagnose my strengths and weaknesses	1.23	0.22	Reject
13	Provided guidelines on how I will adjust to campus life	1.37	0.08	Reject
14	Initiated discussion on university culture and values	1.24	0.72	Reject
15	Discussed issues on academic excellence and integrity	1.42	0.22	Reject
16	Provided information on the available student support services on campus	1.32	0,03	Reject
17	Felt concerned about my personal challenges	1.34	0.06	Reject
18	Is interested in resolving my personal/social challenges	1.31	0.05	Reject
19	Allowed adequate time to discuss personal issues I presented	1.33	0.007	Reject
20	Exhibited friendly attitude towards me	1.62	0.59	Accept
21	Made appropriate referrals when necessary	1.28	0.11	Reject
22	Assured me of confidentiality of personal information provided	1.20	0.28	Reject
23	Upheld my dignity and self-worth during interactions	1.28	0.10	Reject
24	Initiated discuss on future career prospects and plans	1.37	0.07	Reject
25	Discussed global changes in the workplace in relation to my career options	1.23	0.22	Reject
		1.42	0.21	

Table one shows the aspects of academic advising and counseling. Only items 1, 3, 4, 5, 9, 10 and 20 were accepted. The rest were rejected because their means were below the acceptable mean.

Table 2. Percentage Influence of Academic Advising and Counseling on Some Variables

s/n	Significant influence	Good influence	No influence
1 Academic matters	73.3%	20.4%	6.3%
2 Adjustment to university life and culture	37.6%	32.9%	29.4%
3 Personal/social life	30.4%	34.4%	35.2%
4 Career focus	28.8%	30.7%	40.4%

Table 2 shows the influence of academic advising and counseling on academic matters, adjustment to university life and culture, personal/social life and career focus. Influence on academic was rated very high with 73.3%. The rest were low.

The result for the third research question on accessibility of academic advisers showed that 225 (41.6%), 254 (47.1) and 61 (11.32) reported that their academic advisers were very accessible, not always accessible and rarely accessible, respectively.

Table 3. Percentage Ratings on Institutional Mechanisms for Monitoring Academic Advising

S/N		Yes	No
1	The university formally assigned me to my academic adviser	87%	13%
2	The university tries to find out whether I receive academic advising	18%	82%
3	University insists that academic advisers sign course registration forms	87.6%	12.4%
4	Have you been asked questions on the nature of your academic advising other than this?	7.2%	92.8%

From table 3 above the low percentage ratings on items 2(18%) and 4 (7.2%) are instructive. Institutional mechanisms for monitoring academic advising are very weak.

Table 4. Mean Scores on How to Foster Academic Advising and Counseling in Nigerian Universities

S/N		Mean	SD	Decision
1	Training of academic staff on effective academic advising	3.36	0.99	Accept
2	Getting feedback from students on the academic advising received	2.87	0.62	Accept
3	Sensitizing students on the importance of academic advising and what it is	3.22	0.82	Accept
4	Providing decent offices for lecturers to ensure confidentiality	3.34	0.91	Accept
5	Providing time in the lecture time table for academic advising	3.28	0.87	Accept
6	Appointing professional academic advisers for academic advising	2.11	0.18	Reject
7	Remunerating lecturers for academic advising	2.57	0.41	Accept
8	Giving students opportunity to choose their own academic advisers	3.07	0.68	Accept
9	Employing more lecturers to reduce the workload	3.02	0.72	Accept
10	University showing more commitment on academic advising	2.93	0.61	Accept

Table 4 above shows that respondents surveyed favored most of the possible ways of fostering academic advising in the universities identified in the questionnaire. However item 6 which is 'appointing professional academic advisers responsible only for academic advising' was not accepted.

Table 5. t test Analysis of Gender Differences on Aspects of Academic Advising and Counseling

Groups	N	X	SD	SEM	Df	t-cal.	Cit. value	Decision
Male	280	1.41	0.200	0.012	538	1.1335	1.96	NS
Female	260	1.43	0.21	0.013				

P=0.05 level of significance

The result of the unpaired t test for the hypothesis at 0.05 level of significance showed that there was no statistically significant difference between genders in their perception of the aspects of academic advising and counseling in the institutions sampled. The t.value of 1.1335 is less than the table value of 1.96.

5. Discussion

In order to provide quality academic advising and counseling that will foster learning, research is needed to identify the flaws in extant practice and generate specific factors that contribute to quality experiences in the university. In this study we surveyed the aspects of academic advising and counseling, the perceived influence of academic advising and counselling on academic performance, adjustment to university life and culture, personal/social life and career focus. Perceived accessibility of academic advisers were also isolated while ways of fostering academic advising in the Nigerian Universities were surveyed. We also tested the hypothesized gender

difference in the perceived aspects of academic advising and counseling.

The result of the first research question revealed that academic advising focused mainly on academic aspects neglecting important aspects like personal/social, career focus and adjustment to university life and culture. The result of the second research question also shows that academic advising had significant influence only on academic matters. This supports Chiemeké and Nweli's (2008) work that concluded that students and lecturers are unsatisfied with the current process of academic advising in Nigerian Universities.

The result of this study negates the very essence of academic advising and counseling which according to Oriano (2013) should be comprehensive and holistic and should no longer centre mainly on assisting students register their courses. This is why Pang (2012) proposed a learner (adviser)-centered, holistic and flexible academic advising in our university for it to be impactful. In line with this, Pietras (2010) suggests a restructuring of the provisions of academic advising in an effective and efficient manner that meets the needs of both the advisee, college and the society.

Result of the third research question reveals that 41.6% reported that their academic adviser were always accessible while 47.1% and 11.3% reported that their academic advisers were not always accessible and rarely accessible, respectively. According to Hunter et al (2007), effective advising is attained only when academic advisers are accessible and do more than provide information.

Result of the fourth research question indicates that institutional mechanisms for streamlining and monitoring academic advising in Nigerian Universities are very weak. This is an indication of their level of commitment to academic advising. The respondents surveyed also indicated that training of academic staff on effective advising, getting feedback from students, and sensitizing students on the importance of academic advising and what it entails could enhance the practice of academic advising. Providing decent offices for academic advisers, employing more lecturers, giving opportunities for students to choose their academic advisers and university showing more commitment for academic advising in Nigerian Universities were also favored. They did not however support appointment of professional academic advisers. This supports Tinto's (2002) proposal for a paradigm shift in academic advising that promotes students success by setting high expectations, providing support services offering feedback and facilitating involvement in learning through frequent contacts between faculty and students.

6. Conclusion

Universities are noted for academic excellence and integrity. This cannot be achieved only in the formal classroom environment. Periodic one-on-one contact with faculty staff grounded in university's vision, mission and culture will rub off their experience on the students. Drawing from the result of this study, we conclude that a lot needs to be done in the area of academic advising and counseling. Robust, comprehensive, effective, efficient and flexible academic advising system should be instituted, implemented and monitored. This will foster and propagate university culture of excellence and integrity in teaching, research and extension of knowledge.

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, we recommend the following:

1. A more robust, effective and functional academic advising system be by university authorities
2. All academic staff be empowered through seminars, conferences and workshops on academic advising.
3. Allotting time in the time table for academic advising activities like it is for sports.
4. Strengthening institutional mechanisms for monitoring academic advising.

Limitations and suggestions for further research

This study is limited in certain ways. Our sample was small and from one zone in the country. Our findings are not generalizable to other zones and in other State and private owned universities whose activities in academic counseling may be different. Further research can look in these other directions. We also relied on self-report which are not easily verifiable. This study also focused on advisee perspectives. Future research can explore adviser view points to get a balanced perspective.

8. Implications for Practice

Conclusions drawn from this study have implications for the university system and other stakeholders. It calls attention to the need for a paradigm shift in the way academic advising and counseling is structured and implemented in Nigerian universities. A new perspective of academic advising should be holistic and functional. To successfully transform the current practice of academic advising, training programs on academic advising ought to be developed and implemented. Emphasis should be on interpersonal communication skills, sound knowledge of university vision, mission, culture, and knowledge of students' needs. This will lead to proper alignment of institutional goals to individual students' goals. Drawing from the result of this study, universities should create advisee-centered, holistic and flexible advising systems for it to be impactful.

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